



# U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

## Belize

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 8,867 square miles and its population is approximately 280,000. There is a growing Mestizo population (48.7 percent), a diminishing Creole component (24.9 percent), a stable Mayan element (10.6 percent), and a Garifuna component (6.1 percent); the balance of the population (9.7 percent) includes Europeans, East Indians, Chinese, Arabs, and North Americans. More citizens are Roman Catholic (49.6 percent) than any other faith.

Despite the long period of British colonial rule, only 5.3 percent of the population is Anglican. Another 7.4 percent is Pentecostal. Other faiths and denominations include Baptists (3.5 percent), Methodists (3.5 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5.2 percent), and Mennonites (4.1 percent). There are approximately 6,000 Nazarenes, and modest numbers of Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Muslims, Rastafarians, and Salvation Army members. Except for the Mennonites and Pentecostals, who mostly live in the rural districts of Cayo and Orange Walk, followers of these minority faiths tend to live in Belize City. Roman Catholics are numerous throughout the country and constitute the majority faith in all but two of the country's six districts; in Belize and Cayo districts, Catholics hold a plurality of the population, but do not constitute a majority. Approximately 10 percent of citizens identify themselves as nonbelievers or members of no religious congregation. (All figures except total population are from the country's 2000 census.)

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion; however, the preamble to the Constitution reads, "the nation of Belize shall be founded upon principles which acknowledge the supremacy of God." A 2002 amendment to the Constitution expanded the appointed Senate to 12 persons, 1 of whom is appointed by the Governor General acting in accordance with the advice of the Belize Council of Churches and the Evangelical Association of Churches. The membership of these organizations includes several Christian denominations, among them Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Seventh-day Adventist.

Under the Constitution, freedom of religion is part of a broader protection--that of freedom of conscience. In addition, the Constitution provides that no one shall be compelled to take an oath that is contrary to a person's religion or belief. Discrimination on religious grounds is illegal and rarely occurs.

There are no special registration requirements or fees for religious organizations, and legal incorporation for a religion or denomination is a simple matter. Property taxes are not levied against churches and other places of worship. However, property taxes are levied against other church-owned buildings occupied on a regular basis, such as the pastor's or priest's residence. Clergy preach, teach, and train freely.

The traditional Christian holy days of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Monday, and Christmas are observed as national holidays.

The Constitution stipulates that religious communities may establish "places of education" and states that "no such community shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for persons of that community." Although there is no state religion, the educational system maintains by statute a strong religious curriculum. The curriculum ties "spirituality" with social studies courses. It requires in both public and private schools that students from kindergarten through sixth grade receive 220 minutes of religious instruction and chapel every week. However, school exit exams do not have a section on religion. Roman Catholic holy days are routinely observed as school holidays. However, the Constitution prohibits any educational institution from compelling a child to receive religious instruction or to attend any religious ceremony or observance without the child's consent or, if under the age of 18, the consent of the child's parents. This constitutional safeguard is particularly important because most of the country's primary and elementary schools, high schools, and colleges are church-affiliated. There are occasional instances where administrators either do not know the law or misapply it. These are usually corrected through parent-school consultations. In rare cases, the Ministry of Education intervenes to correct the situation.

The Constitution also stipulates that no one shall be required to receive religious instruction or attend services without his or her consent while serving in the armed forces, or while being detained in prison or in any correctional institution. The country's 850 member Defense Force supports one Catholic chaplain but does not restrict the practice of other religions.

Although the Government has oversight authority over the country's lone prison, the institution is managed, and largely financed, by the Kolbe Foundation, a nondenominational Christian nongovernmental organization. Missionaries are active in daily programs at the prison, and at least one lives within the prison compound. Religious conversion is in no way mandatory, but it is part of the primary focus of the prisoner rehabilitation program. Prisoners of any faith may request and receive visits from ministers of their choice.

To help maintain religious harmony, the Constitution reserves the right of the Government to intervene in religious matters "for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedoms of other persons," including the right to observe and practice any religion "without the unsolicited intervention of members of any other religion."

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Under the country's revised Immigration and Nationality Act, foreign religious workers are permitted to enter the country and proselytize; however, they must be registered and purchase a religious worker's permit. The yearly fee is modest. There is a steady stream of religious workers and missionaries from the United States. In addition to preaching, these visitors are involved in building and renovating schools and churches, providing free medical and dental care, and distributing donated food, clothing, and home fixtures.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

#### Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Religious groups occasionally joined forces in ecumenical efforts to distribute goods to the needy, clean up neighborhoods, alert the public to the dangers of promiscuity, fight crime, protect children, and carry out similar endeavors. The Government also occasionally seeks input from a cross-section of the religious community in addressing these issues.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy also discusses religious freedom with leaders of various religious groups.

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